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**EU Accession and a New Populist Center-Periphery
Cleavage in Central and Eastern Europe**

by

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Abstract

The finalized “Return to Europe” of the new EU members states of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has created a whole new ballgame for Eurosceptic political actors. In rational choice terms, the costs of Euroscepticism (and even Eurorejection) have gone down dramatically, while the benefits will most probably go even further up. While the effects of EU accession on the party systems of CEE are multifold, this paper develops one possible effect: the transformation of the already present regional divide within CEE countries into a populist, anti-EU center-periphery *cleavage*.

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Introduction

With the “Return to Europe” formally finalized, attitudes towards the European Union (EU) in the new members states of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have become increasingly critical. While knowledge on the topic is still quite poor at both the elite and mass level—incidentally, this is not much different in the existing member states—the stereotypical picture of the EU has changed from a rich and democratic paradise into a meddling and selfish bureaucratic behemoth.

Despite great pressures from national and international elites, support for EU membership is currently at best lukewarm at the mass level. True, in all eight new post-communist members states the referendums on EU membership were a clear victory for the pro-EU camp: ranging from 67 percent support in Estonia and Latvia to a staggering 92 percent in Slovakia (see table 1). That said, in most countries the turnout reached far less impressive percentages: from 73 percent in Latvia to a mere 46 percent in Hungary. Consequently, only in two of the eight countries a majority of the actual electorate came out to support EU membership: 58 percent of the electorate in Lithuania and 54 percent in Slovenia.

Incidentally, this is not to say that in the other countries the majority of the population are against EU membership; research shows that rejection of EU membership is low in almost all countries, though rising in most (e.g. Bielasiak 2004). But these figures do tell us that at the very least, the support of the majority of the electorate was not strong enough to come and express it in the referendum. Similarly, the dramatic turnout in the 2004 European elections in the new member states at the very least testifies to the diminished enthusiasm for the EU (e.g. Chan 2004).

**Table 1. Support and Turnout for EU Membership
in the 2003 EU Referendums in CEE**

Country	% Yes-vote voters	% Turnout	% Yes-vote electorate
Czech Republic	77	55	43
Estonia	67	64	43
Hungary	84	46	38
Latvia	67	73	49
Lithuania	91	63	58
Poland	77	59	46
Slovakia	92	52	48
Slovenia	90	60	54

The data for the first two columns are taken from the EurActiv.com website at:

<http://www.euractiv.com/cgi-bin/cgint.exe/498476-409?714&1015=3&1014=referendum>.

Nor surprisingly, given the increased Euroscepticism at the mass level, critical voices are also increasingly heard at the elite level. While rejection of the European project remains limited to political actors on the fringes of the political specter, Euroscepticism has some influential supporters within the political mainstream of most CEE countries (e.g. Bielasiak 2004; Kopecky & Mudde 2002; Taggart & Szczerbiak 2002).

In this paper, I start from the assumption that EU accession will further increase the salience of the EU as a political issue in the party politics of Central and Eastern Europe. While the effects will probably be multifold, I will here suggest one possible way in which EU accession could influence party competition in the new member states: in transforming the already present regional divide into a full populist, anti-EU center-periphery cleavage.

The Salience of the European Issue

The Achilles heel of research on “the European issue” is the lack of attention to the salience of the issue (Taggart & Szczerbiak 2002). Most scholars simply seem to assume that the European Union is an important issue in the politics of new and old member states. Thus, when Eurosceptic parties are gaining in elections, and surveys in those countries show that the group of Eurosceptic voters is on the increase as well, they conclude that these parties have gained *because of* their Euroscepticism. While this may indeed be true, there can be many other reasons: after all, parties like the British Conservative Party or the Czech Civic Democratic Party (ODS) are much more than mere Eurosceptic single-issue parties.

Tellingly, the two most important comprehensive surveys of political attitudes in the region, the New Democracies Barometer and the Eurobarometer, do not measure explicitly the salience of the European issue. The lack of studies on the salience of the European issue is undoubtedly related to the lack of a clear operationalization of the concept of salience.

The situation in the old member states is not much better, and this might explain the different interpretations in the literature. For example, on one side one can find scholars who claim that “voter’s support for EU membership appears to provide the basis for a new electoral cleavage” (Gabel 2000: 68), while on the other side colleagues speak of the “limited impact of Europe on national party systems” (Mair 2000). Still, there seems to be a consensus that “one of the most striking features of the issue of European integration is how little salience it has among voters in any country” (Taggart & Szczerbiak 2002: 22).

While this general conclusion is also valid for the new member states of CEE, I would argue that *the potential for political conflict over the EU is higher in the new member states of Central and Eastern Europe than in the old member states*. This is based, among others, on the following arguments: compared to the old member states, (i) the elites and masses in the new member states have been less involved in the whole process of European integration, effectively joining the EU at a time when much had already been achieved and decided by the old members; (ii) the EU has been more politicized in the new member states, most notably through recent accession referendums in all eight countries (see Szczerbiak & Taggart 2004); (iii) a large section of the CEE population, including parts of the elites, have accepted EU accession mainly because, in the words of Czech president Václav Klaus, “there is no other option.”

The Center-Periphery Divide

In the past ten years, most CEE countries have seen a growing importance of a new center-periphery divide. In contrast to the classic model of Lipset and Rokkan (1967), it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak about the centers-peripheries divide with regard to the contemporary situation in CEE. Moreover, while the centers are still mainly urban(ized), as they mostly were during the National Revolutions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Western Europe, the peripheries are no longer exclusively rural. In the post-communist context of contemporary CEE, the periphery also includes the urbanized industrial (wasteland) areas that were developed mainly under the Communist regimes.

Similarly to the historic cleavages, there is an overlap between the cultural and the economic divisions, or in terms of Lipset and Rokkan the center-periphery and the urban-rural cleavage, in which the economic division is roughly between (internationally competitive) services, i.e. the center, and (internationally non-competitive) agriculture and industry, i.e. the periphery. In most cases the center is first and foremost the capital of the country, but also the (sometimes rural) regions that border the old EU member states. These parts are both economically and culturally more integrated with the western world than is the periphery, which is either isolated from all foreign influence, or connected to the eastern states of the former Soviet Union.

If we look at the recent parliamentary elections in the four Visegrad countries, we can clearly see a reflection of the center-periphery divide in the electoral support of most political parties.² The divide is most evident in Hungary, particularly in the highly polarized parliamentary elections of 2002, in which the right-wing block around FIDESZ-Hungarian Civic Party (FIDESZ-MPP) of former Prime Minister Viktor Orbán gained mainly outside of the capital Budapest, while the center-left government parties, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and particularly the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ), were strongest within the cities (e.g. Batory 2002). This division shows a remarkable similarity to the earlier urban-rural cleavage of the 1920s and 1930s, despite the marked differences in the political system and fifty years of communist rule (e.g. Lackó 1996).

In Slovakia, in contrast, it is the right-wing governmental parties, particularly the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKU) and the new Alliance of the New Citizen (ANO), which dominate the two main cities, Bratislava and Košice, while the opposition parties, mainly the populist Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), the unreformed Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS), and the extreme right Slovak National Party (SNS) (e.g. Krivy 2004; Mudde 2002), are strongest in the peripheries.³

This center-periphery divide in party support seems to be clearly linked to a cultural divide between the two regions. For example, in Poland the divide has a clear religious content, with the periphery being more strongly Catholic and the center more secular (e.g. Zarycki 2000; Shabad & Slomczynski 1999). Similar distinctions can be found in other CEE countries as well, although they are generally less pronounced than in Poland (e.g. Krivy et al. 1996). More generally, the people in the center are more liberal, in terms of both economy and rights, pro-Western (including EU), and secular than those in the periphery.

In a similar vein, support for EU membership has been (far) higher in the (urban) centers than in the (industrial and rural) periphery. For example, in Slovakia only 30 percent of the population that lives in villages, i.e., towns with less than 5,000 people, strongly supported EU accession in 1998, compared to 60 percent of those living in big cities, i.e., cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants (Haerpfer 2002: 15).⁴ Also, people in cities feel more European than those in villages: in Slovenia, for instance, only 14 percent of people living in villages have a strong European identity, compared to 43 percent of people living in cities (Haerpfer 2002: 6). Finally, many countries show an important East-West divide, with support for EU membership well above the national average in the more western regions, part of the center, and well below it in the peripheral eastern regions (for Poland, see CBO 2002).⁵

This is not entirely without a “materialist basis,” however. After all, it is “the capital regions and the Western border regions in Central Europe [that] are developing dynamically” (Heidenreich 2003: 313), not in the least because of their connections to the EU (members states). As various studies have shown, the EU accession process has so far profited first and foremost the center, which has received most of the foreign direct investment (e.g. Fazekas 2000; Hunya 1997).⁶ Only some (very)

²While some authors have shown the continued existence of the center-periphery divide within Western Europe, the division is not as deep and less visible (e.g. Vandermotten & Lockhart 2000).

³The only exception to the rule is the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK), the hegemonic political representative of the Hungarian speaking minority in Slovakia. However, its peripheral status is the result of the “residential pattern” of the Hungarian speaking minority (Krivy 2004: 130).

⁴Other research confirms that the strongest support for EU accession is to be found in the larger towns of Slovakia, while the strongest opposition exists in towns with less than 2,000 people. See *RFE/RL Newslime*, 30 April 2004.

⁵Interestingly, the center-periphery was less visible in the actual voting in the EU referendums, which showed only marginal regional differences in most countries.

⁶For example, in 2002 the four peripheral regions of Southern Transdanubia, Northern Hungary, Northern Great Plains, and Southern Great Plains together received 50 percent of the foreign direct investment of the

underdeveloped areas have profited from special EU programs, in part because of incompetence at the local and national levels in the new member states (e.g. Kluvánková-Oravská 2004). But even in the cases where peripheral regions did attract structural funds, large sections of the population will not have profited, most notably industrial workers and (small) farmers.

Not surprisingly, these groups are among the most Eurosceptical within the region. In Poland, for example, only 30 percent of the farmers are positive about EU membership. According to most experts, the enthusiasm of the numerous Polish farmers is unlikely to increase soon:

The Polish farming sector is the most graphic example of such anxiety [over EU membership]. More than 2 million farms in Poland are small and poorly equipped to compete with West European farmers on an expanded market of 450 million consumers. Initially, Polish farmers will be additionally handicapped by the EU's system of direct farm subsidies. They will receive just 25, 30, and 35 percent of full EU subsidies in 2004, 2005, 2006, respectively. No one can predict how enlargement will affect and alter the Polish agricultural sector (Maksymiuk 2004).

While the Polish agricultural sector is typical within the context of the new member states, as the Poles were the only ones to successfully withstand the communist policy of collectivization (e.g. Dziewanowski 1996), farmers in other countries have already expressed their anxiety about the effects of EU membership as well (e.g. Hungary, Lithuania).

There is no reason to assume that this process will change radically in the near future. Indeed, one can even expect that *EU membership will only increase the already existing divide between the (urban) center and the (rural and industrial) periphery in the new member states.*⁷

A Populist Center-Periphery Cleavage?

Many political parties in CEE still lack clear ideological profiles that can distinguish them from their party political competitors (e.g. Lewis 2000; Kopecky 1995). This makes them more volatile and more open to “non-ideological” arguments than political parties in Western Europe. Additionally, fifty years of Communist rule have left their traces on the societies of CEE. While the *tabula rasa* thesis might be exaggerated (see Lawson et al. 1999), it is clear that the importance of pre-communist divisions, let alone cleavages, can only be marginally relevant after fifty years of (partly) totalitarian rule.

The term cleavage is often used synonymously with division or divide. However, following Lipset and Rokkan (1967), a social division only becomes a cleavage if the groups involved have a collective identity and the division is expressed in organizational terms (Gallagher et al. 2001). In other words, the social division has to be “translated” by a political actor (Sartori [1969] 1990). So far, few political parties have explicitly addressed the center-periphery divide in the CEE countries. Most interestingly, there is no clear “party family” that has become the defender of the periphery.

Historical examples from various parts of the world, including the region itself, testify to the strong potential for mixing populism with peripheral frustration (e.g. Werz 2003; Held 1996). If one only looks at the four Visegrad countries, one already sees a stunning diversity in political representa-

center region of Central Hungary, which includes Budapest. See <http://www.magyarorszag.hu/orszaginfor/kozigazgatas/kozigazgatas.html>.

⁷Obviously, as Lipset and Rokkan ([1967] 1990: 104) also noted, “such oppositions are not always *purely* territorial. The [peripheral] movements may be completely dominant in their provincial strongholds but may also find allies in the central areas and thus contribute to the developments of *cross-local* and *cross-regional* fronts.”

tives of the various peripheries. However, every country has at least one potential political actor that could add a populist flavor to the center-periphery.

In the Czech Republic, the barely reformed Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) has its strongholds in the industrial wastelands of West Bohemia and South Moravia (e.g. Hanley 2001). While still officially an internationalist communist party, the KSČM is no longer the *avant garde* of the proletariat, but presents itself as the *vox populi* (voice of the people) instead. It is a staunch defender of state protection (even part ownership) of large industries and farms. And it criticizes “Prague,” i.e., the center, for being too right-wing and neo-liberal and for selling out the country, and the (real) people, to foreigners.

In Hungary, in sharp contrast, it is the national-conservative camp that traditionally represents the “anti-urbanist” periphery (e.g. Lackó 1996). In the early 1990s, the main party representative of this camp was the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), but since its electoral demise the prime position has been taken over by the radically transformed FIDESZ-MPP. Founded in March 1988 by young university students and graduates, the then radical-liberal Federation of Young Democrats, together with the also liberal SZDSZ, was the party of the liberal Budapest intelligentsia (Kiss 2002). However, after various internal struggles, FIDESZ increasingly moved into the political space left by the imploded MDF, effectively incorporating both its politicians and supporters. Since then, the center-periphery divide separates the two “liberal” parties, with FIDESZ-MPP as the party of the (populist) periphery and SZDSZ as the party of the (urbanist) center (cf. Kiss 2002).

In Poland, the main populist representative of the periphery is the agrarian-populist Samoobrona (Self-Defence). The relationship between its electoral support and the size of the community of voters is almost perfectly linear: in the 2001 parliamentary elections, in which Samoobrona gained 10.2 percent countrywide, its support in rural areas was 16 percent, in towns up to 50,000 inhabitants 8 percent, in cities between 50,000 and 200,000 7 percent, and in cities over 200,000 people just 5 percent (Wilkiewicz 2003: 171). However, unlike the Polish Peasant Party (PSL), an establishment party that represents the farmers in southern and southeastern Poland, Samoobrona is the angry voice of the agricultural workers of the peripheral northeastern and northwestern parts of the country (e.g. Krok-Paszkowska 2003). After a slow start, in which the political party operated fully in the shadow of the militant trade union arm, Samoobrona and its leader Andrzej Lepper have grown well beyond their initial constituency of militant farmers and have even made inroads into the industrial wastelands and peripheral cities.

In Slovakia, finally, the non-Hungarian-speaking periphery is traditionally well represented by the long-time dominant left-wing populist Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), which recently added the name People’s Party (i.e., L’S-HZDS). The party has been able to attract massive support from both the peripheral rural areas and the population in the industrial wastelands of Northern and Central Slovakia (e.g. Haughton 2001). In recent years the party has received competition from the unreformed Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS), whose electorate strongly resembles that of HZDS (Krivý 2004).

Few of these parties have linked the center-periphery divide explicitly to the issue of EU accession. This is primarily because, while most CEE countries have already experienced more debate about the EU than the current member states, much of the debate has stayed within the confines of an elite consensus on achieving EU membership. If a party was to question EU membership openly, it lost its coalition potential. Moreover, given the overwhelming, if increasingly lukewarm, support for EU membership at the mass level, few parties dared to be held responsible for keeping the country from full membership, risking the wrath of the voters (e.g. Haughton 2004).

By securing EU membership, the desire of many citizens in the region to “return to Europe” has been satisfied. Almost equally important, the fear of being left behind has disappeared. In terms of rational choice theory, this has led to a significant change in the costs and benefits of a Eurosceptic strategy for (more) mainstream political parties in the region. Let me explain.

EU membership will significantly decrease the political costs of Euroscepticism, as the EU can be now criticized without the risk of having to pay the ultimate penalty (i.e., being turned down for membership).⁸ At the same time, the electoral gains of Euroscepticism were already high, with substantial numbers of Eurosceptic citizens in the region who, so far, have been courted almost exclusively by extremist parties. And one can assume that the gains will only rise, at least in the short term, as the EU can never fulfill all the expectations that the organization itself, and even more importantly its advocates in the region, have raised—particularly in the recent pro-EU campaigns for the referendums. Thus, the potential electoral gains will rise, while the potential political costs will fall.

There is another reason why electoral gains are expected to rise. In most countries, the communist successor parties have been traditionally strong in the peripheries. However, they have also been the staunchest supporters of European integration. They cannot continue to have it both ways, i.e., be the defenders of the losers in the reforms, on the one hand, and be the supporters of the European Union, the basis of most of these reforms, on the other. The recent dramatic drops in public support for some social democratic parties in the region, notably the once dominant Alliance of the Democratic Left (SLD) in Poland and of Party of the Democratic Left in Slovakia (SDL) in Slovakia, might be first signs of a change in voting behavior of the periphery.

It is only a matter of time before political entrepreneurs in the region will put two and two together, and try to politicize the center-periphery divide by pointing to larger socio-economic and cultural differences. The EU could provide the perfect external enemy to give this argumentation a classic populist spin (e.g. Grzymała-Busse & Innes 2003; Henderson 2001). So far, populism has been addressed mainly with respect to the past in the post-communist context, i.e., through the image of “the stolen revolution” (see Mudde 2001). But in the coming years this will become less and less relevant, and populists will need new targets. The center-periphery divide, in combination with a national populist anti-EU position, would be perfect; also because it has links back to the classic populist discourse of the 1920s and 1930s in this region, which posited that the key struggle was between the rural and “national” people and the urban and “cosmopolitan” elites (e.g. Lackó 1996).

In the contemporary context, the ultimate struggle would be between the national (i.e., anti-EU) people in the periphery and the international (i.e., pro-EU) elites in the center. This way, the populist critique of the EU would be able to aggregate and explain the various levels of division between the center(s) and peripheries (socio-economic, cultural and political). It could also build upon the “cleavage” between free market liberalism and economic populism, which various authors have considered particularly relevant in the post-communist context (e.g. Lawson et al. 1999). Most importantly, the populist critique of the EU could provide these other divisions with a collective identity—which abstract economic visions cannot—most notably to people from the peripheries, which is essential for transforming the divide into a cleavage.⁹

Alternative Futures?

If the tangible benefits of economic and political reforms will continue to elude large parts of the population and, thus, to further erode the hard-earned patience of East European voters, then we can expect to see either a continued electoral ascendancy of

⁸That this fear was not without empirical basis could be seen by the EU’s demarche of Slovakia under the third Mečiar government, when the country was relegated from the group of front-runners for EU membership in part because of its ambiguous attitude towards the EU.

⁹This closeness to the center-periphery divide and party positions on Europe has been also noted in Scandinavia (e.g. Jahn 1999). It is perhaps oldest and deepest in Norway, one of the few countries still to resist the European dream, where the periphery has at times expressed its longstanding anti-Oslo sentiment through rejection of EU membership (e.g. Sitter 2001; Valen 1976; on the history of the center-periphery divide in Norway, see Lipset and Rokkan 1967).

“assorted” unorthodox parties or the increasing temptation of orthodox political parties to resort to opportunistic electoral appeals to prevent further inroads (Pop-Eleches 2001: 31-32).

Clearly, the occurrence of a relevant populist center-periphery cleavage is only one possible scenario for the future. Whether or not it will develop depends both on the populist actors themselves and on their party political competitors. Political actors have to be willing to give a populist interpretation to the center-periphery divide, and try to build a morally-based identity around this distinction. However, given the electoral possibilities, and the omnipresence of populist sentiments at both the elite and mass level within the region (Mudde 2001), this seems highly predictable.

Politics, like economics, is about supply and demand. And even if pro-Western parties cannot prevent the supply side from developing, they can try to diminish the demand for a populist anti-EU politics. To prevent such politics from becoming one of these “opportunistic electoral appeals,” both the national governments in Central and Eastern Europe and the European Union will have to make sure that the good and the bad of EU membership are divided more equally between the center and the periphery. Also, they should not focus exclusively on the long term, as the people in the periphery are running out of patience.

Obviously, the bulk of the activities will have to be initiated by the national governments in the region, as they are (still) the main institutions responsible for economic redistribution within their own countries. In this respect, the recent proposition of the Slovak SDKU to limit foreign direct investment stimuli to the poorer regions is a promising first step (*The Slovak Spectator*, 29 March 2004). However, the EU can do at least two things: (1) be more active in making sure that the new member states make full use of the structural funds; and (2) put pressure on the CEE national governments to distribute the pros and cons of European integration.

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